

Sample Spreads For Review

How and what would you write to someone who gave birth to you? It's the beautiful premise that threads this heartfelt compendium of letters by sons and daughters addressed to mothers, some living and others who have passed on. On one level, it's an ode to the importance of parental love and the bond which still binds across time and space, even when, no, especially when things get tough. On the other, it's retrospection of a deeper kind, a mirror for self-reflexivity, to really see clearly, warts and all, without any pretence.

YEOW KAI CHAI

Poet and Former Director, Singapore Writers Festival

Here are stories of a-witnessing in so far as the child watches and bears witness to the mother. Some stories will leave you in wonderment and not a little envious. If you were a mother, you might even panic at some. Will you be seen as the mother is seen here? There is no rulebook for mothers, and, if there is one it should best be eschewed. For the most heart-breaking stories are the ones that stick strictly to rules. These letters are most illuminating when they speak to the tenuous link between mother and child aspirations/expectations and reality. It is a privilege to be allowed access to them.

DANA LAM

*Writer/Performer, Still Life (2019),
and Associate Artist with Checkpoint Theatre*

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Letter to my Mother



*Words of love and perspectives on
growing up from sons and daughters*

EDITED BY FELIX CHEONG

mc Marshall Cavendish
Editions

Sample Spreads For Review

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This book is dedicated to all parents,
in the hope that these shared experiences will
inspire and shape your own parenting journey.

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Foreword

Felix Cheong

When was the last time you spoke to your mother? Do you remember the drift of that conversation, its turns and tide, its tone and tales? What would you have edited out if you had recorded it and replayed it as a memory?

I never got round to a last conversation with Mum in her final days. Discharged from Changi General Hospital on Christmas Eve, 2019, she was living on borrowed time, with only one lung doing the work of two. Even hooked up to an oxygen tank, she was gasping, like a diver drowning in fresh air. There was no float she could hold onto to keep her body from sinking into itself.

By then, pneumonia had already widowed her. Dad, her husband of 56 years, died on December 12, barely a fortnight before. And pneumonia would soon orphan my brothers and me on January 3.

How swiftly death comes, and how mute.

Not that Mum had much to say. Her words had already been cut down to size since 2015, when vascular dementia

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began eating her from the inside out. Words were precious and few, more so now that every breath was a fight to stay awake, stay the execution. Whatever she could manage was guttural, often cries of pain as her diapers was being changed.

When I visited her on New Year's Day, she was pale and weak, weakened still by a lack of appetite. She could barely sit up. Her body was shutting down for the long sleep ahead.

"How are you feeling?" I asked in Cantonese.

"Aaah," Mum said, raspy. "Very pain."

I, the writer-son she had been proud of, who would dedicate his next two books to his late parents, could offer no words of comfort at that point. All the poems I had ever written about death, its long blade and its long wake trailing into the night, were mute. No lyrical flourishes could have explained how her husband had slipped away without one last look; no language came close to breaching the divide between the living and dying.

I sat with Mum for a while, and left soon after. The next time I sat by her side, her face was already cold but not stiff yet. Again, words failed me. I fell back on – and was held up in grace by – the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary and the Glory Be.

Borrowed words, but they burrowed deep.

Over the next few weeks, I would be haunted by what I did not manage to say to Mum. All the thanks I could have offered; all the memories I could have told her that I cherish; all the things she had taught me; all the sacrifices she had made to bring us up – and I said nothing.

At the far end of the long corridor of grief, I soon realised, stood regret. I met it, asked to be relieved of the burden but

instead, it walked me down another long corridor where guilt awaited.

All I could do was visit Mum's niche, her urn next to Dad's, touch their picture gently and whisper my thanks, over and belatedly, till something broke up, broke down or broke away.

Whatever it was, however it did, almost three months after her passing, I dreamt of Mum:

DREAMING OF MUM

I dreamt of you last night, Mum.

I was piggybacking you, as you must have done with me once.

The day was dusk but felt like dawn.

The wind was light and so were you,

All spirit and spirited, the weight

Of being dead lifted, like an early Easter.

I was a little hunched, talking, in Cantonese,

A bit of this and a hunch about that, turning inanities

Inside out into a conversation.

It was like old times many times over.

You laughed often - can't remember why -

But it made the trudge uphill eventful.

I never got round to where we were heading.

Wakefulness snatched me

And left me knowing.

It is coming to the end of 100 days

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Since you left without saying goodbye.
But this, I know, Mum.

You are now in a better place, as the cliché goes.
This poem is tearing even as it finds its words,
Not from sadness or fear, but a dream-like insight
That you are safe, as free of ash and dust
As my dearest memory of your laugh.

I finally had that last conversation with Mum.

In this anthology of 20 letters, our contributors from all walks of life got to write their letter to their mother. To a man, and woman, they all found the task extremely difficult, probably the most painful and private thing they had ever put pen to paper (or fingers to screen). Many confessed afterwards they had to finish writing it in tears (as I did with this foreword).

For some of them, their mother had long passed away, so their letter became a requiem, a way to summon her memory, a callout that she had not been forgotten. For others whose mother is alive and well, their letter was a thank-you card for the years that gratitude had not been expressed in person. And for a handful, their letter was not so much peace talk as a negotiation with their past in which their mother's shadow was writ large.

Above all, *Letter to My Mother* is an honest, raw and emotional read. It is written with much love (and sometimes with its alter ego, hate) and humanity. And hopefully, after



Felix (right) and his mother.

reading these letters, you will ask yourself the questions I had posed you earlier:

When was the last time you spoke to your mother? Do you remember the drift of that conversation, its turns and tide, its tone and tales? What would you have edited out if you had recorded it and replayed it as a memory?



Felix Cheong is the author of 19 books, including six volumes of poetry, a trilogy of satirical flash fiction and five children's picture books. His works have been nominated for the prestigious Frank O'Connor Award and the Singapore Literature Prize. His latest work is a libretto written with composer Chen Zhangyi, *Panic Love: An A Cappella Opera*, released as a music video.

Conferred the Young Artist Award in 2000, Felix holds a Masters in Creative Criting and is currently a university adjunct lecturer with the National University of Singapore, University of Newcastle, Murdoch University and Curtin University.

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Dear Jenny

Regina De Rozario

Dear Jenny,

They have asked me to write you a letter. Some short story I could share about the relationship we have had, or perhaps the way we parted and how the time we have spent apart feels. I must admit that this has been something that I had to sit with for a while, and even this first paragraph is taking me far too long to write. Too many starts and stops between the first line and this point. It does not matter how I try to approach this task: Whether I try to write by hand or type in long streaming sentences, every word feels inadequate, destined to be deleted, crumpled, or erased.

How do you say hello to someone you have been longing to see? How do you say goodbye again?

I am writing to you at a strange time. We are in the middle of a pandemic. The climate is off-kilter. The world as you left it has changed so much. We alternate between praying for the best and preparing for the worst; between keeping an eye on

the dramatic headlines of the daily news and just getting on with the mundane urgencies of every day.

The people you left behind have changed too. Keith and Gwen and their families are doing fine, so you need not worry. The children are all grown up now, and I see pieces of you in them and their own children. Pieces of the woman I knew when I was a child. Pieces of your smile and your laugh.

In myself, I see other pieces of you in the mirror in the morning; in my haze of sleepiness, in the moments before I have my coffee. I hear your older voice in my voice when I say “Good morning”. An uttered acknowledgment, shaking myself awake, bracing myself for another day. Not smiling. No laugh.

The pandemic has made it necessary for us to stay at home for weeks on end. The hours meld, and the days feel endless. Every morning, I find myself checking the calendar to remember what day of the week it is. Lately, every day feels like a Monday after a long weekend. Tired, and dragged out. My days are filled with busyness but ironically, I begin each one feeling like I did not get enough done the day before and not quite knowing what I should prioritise in the next.

If you choose not to, it is possible not to see or speak to anyone at all. These days, I keep to myself and try to get my work done. I avoid crowds and unnecessary conversations. I am a rock, as you used to sing to me, I am an island.

You can imagine then, how easy it is in this isolation, to spend much of my time these days in my head, letting the fragments of the present day fall into place alongside fragments of the days that have passed. They all seem to fit effortlessly, and they all seem to lead me back to you.

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The wind is belting the windows. It has not stopped raining since Sunday.

I cannot remember the last time I walked in the rain, or breathed in the wind, unmasked and unencumbered, feeling it tingle the hairs on my neck, or cool against my bare face. I do remember the walks we used to take from our house to the seaside, well before the seaside was pushed aside by the highway and our house was shuttered and demolished and our address expunged from the street directory. I remember the seaside, the way its scent would hit us even before we arrived. Waters sparkling under the sun, green like glass. That kite you made out of tracing paper, cellophane and bamboo, that I never learned how to fly. Keith and Gwen were so much better at it. I would drag my paper diamond across the grass but never quite fast enough for the wind to whip it into the sky.

Keith and Gwen were so much better at things. Running, cycling, all manner of sports and games. “Well, they are older than you,” you would say to me, which was an assurance when I was five, but became less so by the time I got to 10. For years, I was always the last to come in any race. Rarely picked for any team. Still hopeless at kite-flying. “All my children are different and special in their own way,” you said, that one day when I came home from school, upset that I had lost at either “zero point” or hopscotch or some other *de rigueur* recess sport. It was the kind of thing every mother would say to her child but it was the way that you said it as you held my head close to your chest. Your words, punctuated by your heartbeat, followed by your slow drag on your cigarette. I paced my breathing with yours, every exhalation building belief.

These days, I strain to remember what it is like to be outside, bare-faced, breathing in the wind. But then I think about that silly kite and my attempts at flying it, and your words of belief in me, no matter my failure at something so simple, I cannot help but smile.

Jenny – I have only ever called you by your name once. That morning in the hospital when I arrived at your room and found you sitting up in bed, but with your body slumped slightly forward, head limp, eyes closed.

“Good morning,” I uttered, at a volume loud enough to wake any sleeping person. “She is up,” I said to the nurse who stood at the other side of the room, folding your blanket. I must have surprised or confused her because she stared blankly at me for a second, and then dropped the blanket and left the room without a word.

“Mum, I am here. I am back,” I said, sitting on the bed next to you, taking your hand. You did not fold your fingers around mine and your eyes remained closed. I knew then, but disbelief compelled me to say your name. Not louder, for I knew I could no longer wake you, but a whisper: “Jenny.” And then I let your hand go.

We always knew – Keith, Gwen and I, that it would be cancer that would take you. You were always good at taking care of us, but we never understood why you could not do the same for yourself. I recognised over time that the cigarettes were a part of that front that you had built for yourself. Jenny, only daughter, mission schoolgirl, working mother, raising three children at a time where women like you were asked to

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stop at two. You did almost everything they asked you to. You needed something for yourself.

I remember one particular day. This was shortly before we had to move away from our old house. It was in the middle of the day, in the midst of packing up the things in our kitchen, you had an argument with your husband. Something about the things you wanted to keep and the things he wanted to throw away. I was too young to understand the words but I was familiar with the volume and tone – clanging and cruel, punctuated with pauses that chilled the room. You stopped it short by taking me by the hand and briskly walking out of the door. And then lifting me in your arms, carrying me, while you kept walking without stopping until you reached the beach.

You lifted me up onto the breakwater first and told me to sit down. You then clambered up, drew your lighter and pack of cigarettes from your pocket, stared for a while at the horizon before sitting down next to me. I remember watching you, wondering what would happen next, since we were clearly not here to fly kites. I remember the wind was belting our faces, green water foaming at the bottom of the breakwater, sending wafts of salt air upwards. You smoked one cigarette after another as you stared steadfastly ahead. I remember understanding I needed to stay with you, to keep quiet, to not ask questions, even as the time passed as I started to feel hungry. I watched groups of other children running up and down the sand. I counted the ships that floated slowly across the waters.

As the shadows got longer, you finally spoke. “You know, we may never come back here again,” you said, exhaling, still staring ahead. “And even if we do,” you continued, as you

extinguished your cigarette, “this place will never be the same. They are pushing the sea out. We will forget we are an island.”

It was nearly dark by the time we got back. Father was moving more things out of the house. A pile of things, we surmised, that we would not be taking with us. You looked at the pile and said nothing, moving past him and exchanged no further words for the rest of the evening. I looked at the pile and noticed my kite balanced at the top of it, freshly broken and askew.

We moved out a week later, to set up our new home, in a new flat, in a new town. You were right, we never went back to the seaside, you and me.

Not every memory of you speaks of loss. I think about the times you would stay up nights with me as I studied until 3 in the morning. You would read the newspaper, work through the crossword, or play solitaire. We did not speak to each other, but I found you a comfort. Even on nights when I did not have to study for exams, I stayed up anyway, and we would sit and read together, or listen to the BBC World Service in the background.

I think about the times we danced together in the living room to The Beatles and The Beach Boys. You singing along to Simon & Garfunkel. Your attempts to teach me the twist or some other dance from your heyday. Your smile as you pinned up the pictures I painted for you, and the silly one-person plays I would write and act out and force you to sit through. Your sigh when I first told you that I was in love with a girl. “Well,” you uttered in acknowledgment, pulling my head close to your chest. “I always knew you were going to be different.”

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I should never have left the hospital that night. You had been in for more than a week, not quite recovering. We were told to pray for the best, but to prepare for the worst. Keith, Gwen and I took turns. I would take the evening visiting hours and stay overnight. Sometimes reading next to you, sometimes humming, sometimes calming you with a prayer when you said you were afraid, sometimes lying with you in your bed, holding your head against my chest, patting your back, watching it rise and fall as you fell asleep. But that particular night, you said you wanted to sleep early, that it was better for me to sleep in my own bed. And so I left.



A collage of Regina's growing up years with her mother.

The truth is, Jenny, I have been letting the hours meld for a while now. Well before this pandemic and this need to isolate for safety reasons. I fill the hours with busywork. I have found it a good way of putting some time and distance in-between myself and the day I lost you. To push the sea out, but not wanting to forget. People have asked to see me, and we make plans to get together, but I have always managed to devise an explanation to stay away, to not have to respond to the inevitable "How are you?" One day, I will be ready but as they say, for now, this distance is necessary for safety. And a rock feels no pain, and an island never cries.

This rain is slowing down to a drizzle. It is nearly 2am but from where I sit I can see windows that are still lit. I wonder if anyone is up, listening to music, or learning how to dance, or playing solitaire.

I miss you in these hours, Jenny, as they meld and lead me to another day.

Love,
Gina



Regina De Rozario is an artist and writer from Singapore. Her practice and research interests include psychogeography and how the city shapes the narrative spaces we inhabit. She is also active as one-half of Perception3, an interdisciplinary art duo that explores the notions of loss and memory through text, photography, digital video and site-specific installation.

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The Battle for My Left Hand

Charmaine Deng

You asked how I remember it.

I am five years old; I am sitting on my left hand so it will not get hurt.

It is 1984 – the year George Orwell imagined the world under totalitarian rule; in Singapore – which the Democratic Western world deems an autocracy – and I am a Daughter and Student, and therefore under the biggest dictatorship of all.

Sitting at the miniature desk in my yellow bedroom, it is being impressed upon me that I am a Right-Hander. You and Dad have decided that my left-handedness must be eradicated, and you are gamely executing the order.

1982, aged three: Kindergarten teacher, at wits' end, phones you because I just will not colour within the lines. You and Dad whisper behind your shut bedroom door; I know it is about me.

1984, aged five: You have tried to frustrate the southpaw out of me. You have made me sit on my left hand. The mugs of crayons, snacks and drinks are on my distant right.

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But, table arrangements are not enough to stop nature – or at least, not mine. My left hand persists, reaching stubbornly for Crayolas and crackers, even if it means having to stand up.

This is a decade pre-Internet; there are no forums yet where mothers exchange clever ways to break their children's spirits. Out of ideas and patience, you lie in wait, and sting the back of my "wrong" hand with a thin bamboo cane every time I lift it.

Left is the opposite of right, I am learning, but so is wrong, and I am both.

2004, aged 25: The word "sinister" comes from the Latin for "left". The Bible tells us, after God separates the good from the bad, He puts the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

I ask why you had felt so strongly that I must not be left-handed, and you shrug. Twenty years later, it is a minor issue. Without looking up from your phone, you say simply: "The world is made for right-handers."

Of course, you are right. The majority, is right. From fridge doors to fountain pens, scissors to spiral-bound notebooks, the world is easier for those who fit its norms.

According to the Bible, goats are bad. According to the Chinese Zodiac, I am a goat.

1984, aged five: I am dragging my feet behind you, on the long walk from our block to the next. My slippers are on wrong, because you would not help me with them. Mothers do not help their children with footwear when they have had it up to here and are giving them away.

The old lady in the next block lives alone and has no children, you said. She could use a naughty girl like me as a servant. We had seen her shuffling around, eyes down, in

the supermarket. She smelt of mothballs. It is her you fear becoming now, isn't it? Becoming alone. A death before dying.

I try to match my stony face to yours, ignoring neighbours hungry for drama. Neither of us want to give in, to admit we need the other. I am carrying my pillow; a plastic bag you thrust at me bumps against my leg. I sneak a peek in the bag: Just two pairs of panties, which you had packed for me. Somehow this, of everything that has been happening, breaks me. I am sorry, I cry. I will be good. I will do whatever you want. Please don't give me away.

1984, aged five: I just want to scribble, and if I cannot do it with one hand, I will just do it with the other. So I teach my right hand to write. I make sure to use it to turn pages when you read to me. We are halfway through *The Little Mermaid*. You pause to coo: "See, if a mermaid princess gave up her tail and her sweet voice for some legs, you can use your right hand, right?" Persuasion and punishment; carrot and stick.

Fine, I concede – but only when someone is watching. Alone, I stubbornly hold books in my left, and read about the dumb little mermaid's choice backfiring—the prince loves another woman, as they do, and she will become sea-foam. I brush my hair with my left hand before bed, looking hard in the mirror.

1987, aged eight: The cane has become an extension of your right hand. It delivers correction whenever I go off-book – such as now, when I come home with 99 per cent on a test.

I hold my left palm out to face your sentence. Since it is the hand less used, it can afford to be sore.

It is not the marks I am being punished for, you clarify: It is because I was careless. You do not demand perfection.

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1993, aged 14: Even though you do not demand perfection, I am in a prestigious programme in a prestigious all-girls school, my path to an illustrious government career all mapped out for me.

I am not unhappy. Not yet. With your encouragement, I have not stopped penning *précieux* poems and prose – it is a respectable hobby among scholarly teens. You read everything I show you, even stick some of it up on the fridge. I even write a play then–Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew actually comes to see – surprisingly small for a giant, but a presence so immense we know the moment he enters the Jubilee Hall theatre at Raffles Hotel, even before whispers reach us backstage, even though the houselights are completely dark.

But when I step onstage, it is your face I look for first.

After the performance, the Father of Singapore shakes my right hand cursorily. I curb the urge to curtsy, then turn to see if you are proud.

I continue drafting amateur novels and filling in aptitude tests with the same hand, and there is no struggle. Like Margaret Atwood's rat, I am free to go anywhere – as long as I stay inside the maze.

1994, aged 15: I am the same age now as the little mermaid was when she rose to the surface of the ocean and everything changed.

I play Nirvana on repeat. The vicarious angst of their violent guitar riffs is just enough to keep me from acting on my own teen spirit. Also, I have a small crush on their beautiful, tormented frontman, Kurt Cobain, who plays guitar left-handed. He was also forced by his father to switch from left to right as a child.

Cobain shoots himself in the head. He is found dead with the shotgun barrel in his left hand.

I resolve to wear black for a month, but only manage one morbid week before you kidnap the Nirvana t-shirt I have been wearing over my school uniform. It needs washing, you say. I never see it again.

1994, aged 15: I am in bed; I have just fallen asleep, at the end of a packed school day, which I will wake in a few hours to repeat. You burst into my room, cane in hand, light streaming behind you through my flung-open bedroom door like a halo of righteous anger.

Cornered in my bed, I make out that I had not placed the dinner dishes in the “right” order after washing them. The sound, the fury, signifies everything wrong with me.

1994, aged 15: I am in bed; I have just fallen asleep, at the end of a packed school day, which I will wake in a few hours to repeat. We have fought over something nobody remembers anymore. You open my door gently, but I have learned to listen for the way it creaks. Eyes closed, I feel you standing over me. I stiffen. What did I forget to do now?

You sigh heavily. My mattress sinks under your weight. Your hand smooths my hair away from my forehead. Your fingers are rough and garlic-scented from cooking lunch and dinner, countless lunches and dinners. Tears gather behind my lids.

It is your left hand. Your left holds the garlic, your right holds the knife.

1995, aged 16: My little sister comes quietly into my room after I have stormed away from another row with you, white and wordless.

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“Why do you have to fight with Mum so much?” she asks. “Can’t you just be more obedient?”

1996, aged 17: The time you said our family would be perfect, if not for me.

1996, aged 17: There is a moment for a teenage girl when she does not belong to anyone. I am between self-absorbed boyfriends, and a devastating disappointment to you – too old for the cane, but apparently too young for boys. You resort to scathing words and withhold phone, party and pecuniary privileges to keep me in line. Dispossessed, I am exhausted with potent, impotent adolescent wrath.

Being a Girl has been simple in a top all-girls’ school where there was nothing we could not do. It is being a Woman which will take learning – but that cannot now be from you.

1997, aged 18: The pre-college watershed. I am strung helplessly between all the futures I want to live. Thorny, sulky, estranged from you, I rely instead on books, music and serendipity, for guidance.

A boy buys me a Radiohead poster with my favourite lyrics on it: “An empowered and informed member of society, pragmatism, not idealism ... Calm, fitter, healthier and more productive. A pig in a cage on antibiotics.” When I wake in the mornings, I bask in its irony like sunlight. It sums up everything I fear government-career me will become, in one easy-to-shudder-at package. Of all the lives I want, this is not one.

Someone gives me my first copy of Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*. I read that famous passage aspiring writers through the ages agonise over, and it creates no conflict in me: “Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you write; find out

whether it is spreading out its roots in the deepest places of your heart, acknowledge to yourself whether you would have to die if it were denied you to write.”

Check, Herr Rilke. “Then build your life according to this necessity,” he intones, in a voice like God’s – like Morgan Freeman’s, but with a German accent.

1998, aged 19: And so, where everybody else turns right, I turn left. I need to find my way, and I will do it alone if I have to.

My peers head off to the most esteemed universities in the world; I stay behind. Scholarships are the opposite of freedom, and I lost your support some time ago, so I will work through college. I eschew Law for Literature – a first, I am told, by a huffy Law faculty member sent to talk me off the ledge.

I quote E.E. Cummings grandly at him: “To be nobody-but-yourself – in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else – is to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight.” He is not impressed.

2003, aged 24: I marry poster-boy much too young; the ring sits uncomfortably on my left hand. I will divorce him three years later, partly because I married him to get out of your house, and partly because it turns out he does not get irony.

I am busy carving out a career as a journalist. Even if it is not the sort of writing I wanted to do, I get to play with words for a living – and that is all that matters.

2006, aged 27: I am promoted at work. Every month, you cut out my “Letter from the Editor”, and carefully add the clipping to a colourful album.

I now write almost exclusively on a keyboard. Meaning, with both hands.

Sample Spreads For Review

2013, aged 34: You have grown old while I was not looking. I have been a head taller than you for years, but your hands — which had once held mine as I learned to walk, learned to write, learned to roller-skate — are bony now, green veins show through translucent skin.

Are these really the same hands that hurt me every time you were angry? They are so small.

2017, aged 38: *The Women's History of the World* suggests humans evolved to be predominantly right-handed because of mothers. Women have carried babies on the left side of their bodies since the dawn of time, making it necessary to complete all sorts of tasks with their right hand alone.

Why on the left? Because nothing comforts a child like its mother's heartbeat. Yours. Mine. Even through difficult years, even through enormous differences, enormous distances.

1972: You are 19 years old. You are making your way from the kampong so small it did not even have its own police station, 600km south via Kuala Lumpur, to the electric lights of Singapore.

You need to find your way, and you will do it alone if you have to.

Away from the draughty wooden house you had never left for a night, the zinc roofs, the kerosene lamps, the school with the benches and the earth floor. Your sprawling family. The mother who stripped you naked and whipped you in the yard, who will never stop asking when you are coming to visit again. Your heart will forever be in two places at once.

But you will travel the world, every continent of it. You will love and be loved. You will find meaning, and understanding. You will make mistakes, and there will be time to fix them.

Do you see it? Where everybody else had turned right, we had turned left. The stubbornness you hated in me, my will you had tried so hard to break — is yours.

2019, aged 40: “No need to hurry. No need to sparkle. No need to be anybody but oneself,” says Virginia Woolf. I have high tea with high-ranking, prematurely-grey diplomat friends, and meet you and Dad for dinner once a month. In both cases, we avoid difficult topics, and laugh instead about how I always get lost because I still mix up my right and left.

My right arm has “writer” tattooed on it. I have a gratifying collection of fountain pens, which I can use without smudging.

My left hand is free of cumbersome jewellery. I use it to stir strong coffee, hold cigarettes, cup lovers' faces when we kiss.

I am 40 years old. My left hand is free.



Charmaine Deng is a former lifestyle journalist and editor. She is interested in memory and identity-construction, and is working on her first novel.